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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the contributions counselors can make to help schools achieve educational excellence and enhance both the quantity and quality of student learning. (BH)

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IN BRIEF

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An Information Digest From ERIC/CAPS
Educational Resources Information Center
Counseling and Personnel Services

Counseling and Educational Excellence:

A Response to *A Nation at Risk*

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. (A Nation at Risk)

With this confrontational and provocative statement, the National Commission on Educational Excellence began its discussion about the imperative for educational reform in the United States. That improvement is needed in how education is designed and delivered is not an issue. What is important is how the change will be effected and what responsibilities and opportunities will exist for different sectors of the educational establishment. This digest focuses on the contributions that counselors can make to help schools achieve educational excellence and enhance both the quantity and the quality of student learning.

Overview

A review of the reports on excellence in education would suggest that the student is frequently viewed as a non-person, that his/her motivation, needs and interests are insignificant in improving the quality of learning. Recommendations consistently refer to what should be done to and about students. Only rarely are students' attitudes and feelings discussed, or the effect of these on their involvement in and response to their schooling.

Student excellence will, in the long run, depend on the attitudes, values and decisions of individual students. We can legislate the length of the school year, extend the school day, and provide more rigor in the school curriculum. However successful these changes seem to be, their ultimate effect on educational excellence depends on how students respond to them, on whether they personally value the proposed changes and see them as meaningful in their own lives. It is absolutely essential that we pay attention to the persons for whom change is intended. More than anyone in the school, the counselor is in a position to interpret the student to educational decision-makers and to emphasize the importance of understanding and working with them. Conversely, counselors have a unique role to play in helping students understand their options and make wise and informed educational choices.

Choice by the learner is and always will be an important aspect of American education. The way to improve education is not to take the choice away from those who will be most affected by choices, but to improve their ability to make their own decisions.

New Imperatives for Counselors

Our current crisis in education, like all crises, confronts us not only with serious problems and challenges, but also with new opportunities. The opportunities for counselors to contribute to educational excellence can be described in the following set of imperatives:

1. Provide an increased emphasis on learning and cognition. The orientation of the counselor is to view students as whole persons, not to separate a problem or concern from those who are experiencing it. Yet to help students master present and future challenges, counselors need to assist them in analyzing and improving their learning efficiency. Through assessment of basic learning style, use of time, learning/study habits, attitudes, and decision-making skills, counselors can identify areas for student improvement. How a student manages his/her learning is as important as how the curriculum is constructed. To focus solely on the curriculum and ignore the learner will negate much of what is desired

2. Diffuse guidance and counseling throughout the curriculum. To be most effective, guidance and counseling need to be thought of as an integral part of the curriculum. They are not special services or curricular add-ons, but a vital force within the school environment. Frequently designated as comprehensive guidance, this approach establishes specific goals and objectives for guidance at each grade level and utilizes a wide variety of techniques and approaches to achieve them. Comprehensive guidance programs call for a high degree of flexibility and resourcefulness on the part of counselors. It is the counselor's responsibility to help all students, through a variety of learning modes and activities, to gain greater insights into themselves, and to make the plans and undertake the actions which will enable them to achieve their potential as effective learners and contributing citizens. In particular, this approach emphasizes the need for counselors to work together with curriculum specialists, parents, teachers and students to identify common objectives and to delineate the roles and responsibilities that each will play.

3. Incorporate life-career planning in counseling. Students perform best when they see that their learning leads to a high-priority personal goal. Establishing and working toward important life goals is a powerful motivator for students to undertake difficult learning tasks. A continuously reviewed and upgraded life career plan for each student can become the focus of his/her educational effort — it can become the glue that binds together many disparate educational activities and experiences. As a result, students can see how their learning in a seemingly isolated area can contribute to their achieving a significant, desired life-goal and living style.

4. Plan for professional renewal. The ability of counselors to contribute to the excellence of the school and the attainments of individual students is strongly influenced by their own level and recency of knowledge. Counseling is not a craft to be practiced as it was by one's predecessors. A continually changing society requires that the counselor know the culture and be able to communicate with students about it. In particular, counselors need to understand the major changes that technology is bringing to all spheres of our information society. They can profit by their own renewal, as well as by their capacity to facilitate the learning of others in the judicious use

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of computers and other high technology. They need to be consumers of technology and, more importantly, program designers — persons who take the lead in describing which technology will be used, and what content will be presented appropriately through technology. Counselors who are neither given the opportunity for nor reinforced in continuing their professional growth will serve as poor role models for others; they will also be unable to utilize the resources which would most likely help students achieve their goals.

5. Assess personal and program effectiveness. Positive change in programs and services depends upon having a systematic procedure for establishing objectives and assessing outcomes. An important responsibility for the counselor is to insure a regular and systematic assessment of individual and program effectiveness. Exotic and complicated research designs are not needed as much as commitment to the systematic collection of data about what is offered to students in the way of assistance and counseling, and what kinds of outcomes or changes are the result of what has been provided. The emphasis here is the commitment to continually examining and re-examining programs and practices, and to using the insights gained from that analysis to make changes and refinements in the program.

All children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (A Nation at Risk)

Students "competently guided" to acquire the capacity for making mature and informed judgments, for securing gainful employment, and for managing their lives so that they are personally rewarding — it is to these ends that counseling is directed. The outcomes will not be achieved by large numbers of students through chance, or even through a well-designed curriculum, *unless* there is explicit attention to them and clear staff support for their achievement. Studying for studying's sake, raising test scores, acquiring more information, or completing a mandated set of courses is not the goal of education. The goal is the mature, strong, and well-informed individual person who has the wisdom and the strength of character to make hard choices, to think critically about his/her own life and society, and to take necessary risks to achieve important goals.

Counselors who see this as their role and bring their many talents and skills to the task can contribute enormously to a "renaissance" in guidance and in the schools. The consequences of such an emphasis are not totally discernible, but it is likely to produce individuals who have both the know-how and the vision to master the tasks that confront us as we approach the twenty-first century.

By Garry R. Walz, Director, ERIC/CAPS